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ABSTRACT

This paper provides Indian parents of children with disabilities with information from the Education for Parents of Indian Children with Special Needs Project concerning communication between Indian parents and non-Indian service providers. Five basic strategies for effective communication are reviewed: (1) when you do not understand, ask for clarification; (2) share information to help the professional understand; (3) when you like something, make positive statements; (4) tell the service providers your thoughts, especially when you do not agree; and (5) at the end of a meeting, review information shared and commitments made to be sure that everyone understands the same thing. The valuable role that parents can play in advocating for their children's health and educational programs is explained. The paper notes that the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in educational decision making is legally mandated, explicitly points out cultural differences between Indians and non-Indians in communication behaviors and respect for authority, as well as discusses expectations of service providers concerning parents' behavior and of parents concerning professionals' behavior. (SV)

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COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH NON-INDIAN SERVICE PROVIDERS

This information is provided by Education for Parents of Indian Children with Special Needs (EPICS) Project. EPICS is a national Parent Training and Information (PTI) project located in Bernalillo, New Mexico. The EPICS project has provided training and information to many Indian families in New Mexico, and across the country.

When Indian parents talk with service providers about their child, there are some basic skills that can make communication more effective. For parents to become more effective at communicating with service providers, parents need to express their ideas and questions so that they are understood. As parents, we must also listen to what the service providers say and let them know if we do not understand or if we disagree with what they are saying to us.

Parents of children with special needs must communicate with many different professionals. It is important that communication is effective for everyone. There are five basic skills which parents can learn to communicate effectively.

1. When you do not understand, ask for clarification.
2. Share information to help the professional to understand.
3. When you like something, make positive statements.
4. Tell the service providers your thoughts especially when you do not agree.
5. At the end of the meeting, review information shared and commitments made to make sure you all understand the same thing.

None of these skills are new inventions. Indian parents may already use them in their everyday lives with family and friends. However, they may not feel comfortable communicating with unfamiliar people or in new situations.

These basic skills will help Indian parents to become more comfortable and involved in their children's educational and health programs and to gain the confidence and insight of being active partners.

1. When you do not understand, ask questions:

Parents of children with special needs find themselves in many situations where communication is difficult. Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, meetings with diagnosticians, therapists, medical professionals are just a few. Parents of children with disabilities have many questions and need answers. Is my child okay? Will he walk? Will he talk? How do I get help? Asking these questions help parents and families understand their child's disability. By asking questions, parents become more informed and begin to participate in the planning and decision making for their child.

As part of their cultural upbringing, many American Indians are taught not to ask questions. American Indians are taught to respect people of authority (tribal leaders, tribal councilmen/women) and within some Indian cultures, asking questions is viewed as disrespectful. It is assumed that the people of authority will provide all the information that a person needs to know.

Service providers, on the other hand, are trained to ask and answer questions, and they want to hear what parents have to say. It is customary for some Indian parents to remain quiet and not ask questions, it is sometimes assumed that the parent is uncaring or understands what has been said. In reality, the parent may have lots of questions but dare not ask.

Questions clarify meaning, and others will benefit from the questions you ask. Remember it is not impolite when dealing with service providers to ask questions, they want you to ask.

If parents are unfamiliar with certain words, they should ask for an explanation of the words being used; an explanation in simple terms; or examples can help you to understand.

A helpful strategy to use before a meeting is to write down your questions. It is also important to write down the kinds of answers you are looking for so you can refer back to them.

2. Share your thoughts and information

When Indian parents deal with service providers, they assume that the therapist, educator, or physician know what needs to be done. Parents may be hesitant about asking questions or

providing information to the professionals. They often expect the professional to provide the needed treatment without any input from them.

More and more service providers are recognizing parents as experts on their children. Indian parents and extended family members spend more time with their child than anyone else.

As experts, parents can provide much valuable information to teachers, therapists, doctors, and other service providers. Often parents can provide information that no one else has. Parent needs to recognize they are the experts and that they can help service providers by sharing the information about their child.

Laws such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandate that parents be involved in the decision making process for their child's education and early intervention program. Parents must also take part in any decision regarding medical treatment for their child. They are expected to share the unique information they have about their child so that good decisions can be made. By sharing this information, service providers are better able to meet some of the parents' expectations for their child.

3. If you like something, say so.

In stressful situations, people may tend to focus only on the negative things and forget to see the positive. In any relationship, it is important to recognize the positive things that the other person has done. Compliments boost a person's morale, as well as giving that individual a better idea of what strategies and results are expected. A person who feels appreciated is going to work even harder. This is true for everyone, and most people can remember the good feelings that came with compliments at home, school, or work.

Appreciation of ones' effort is important. It works that way with service providers. If they feel that the work they do with your child is appreciated, they will work harder. An honest and natural positive comment from a parent can go a long way to keep a service provider motivated.

For some Indian parents it is customary not to give verbal compliments. They were taught to give appreciation in other ways. When dealing with service providers, this is an appropriate way to show appreciation. A simple "thanks" will go a long way.

4. Voice your disagreement

Many Indian parents learned not to voice disagreement when tribal authorities speak. They learned to listen with respect. These same parents may be hesitant to voice disagreements with service providers who serve them.

When someone shares a different opinion, it helps people look at the problem from more angles and seek creative alternatives. Consequently, they may find more solutions. Good ideas often are not voiced because people are afraid of looking foolish. It is important to overcome that fear, because a different view may force the group to think in better ways.

Sometime meetings between parents and service providers can become emotionally charged and tense. Statements made at meetings can make parents feel angry, scared, frustrated, upset, or sad. Parents can not always control what other people say at meetings, but they can control how they respond or answer. The following offer suggestions when meetings become overheated.

- a. Ask for a short break to rethink what has been said.
- b. Ask for the meeting to be rescheduled.
- c. Prepare ahead of time and bring along a friend, relative or advocate.

5. At the end of a meeting, review and clarify any unresolved issues.

At the end of a meeting, it is helpful to review information and decisions that were made in the meeting. Parents often feel reluctant to do this because they assume that the professionals will do what is important for their child. Moreover, they may assume that professionals are in a hurry and do not want to spend any more time than is absolutely necessary. Yet, parents are decision makers for their children, and it's most important they walk away with a clear understanding of what has been heard and decided. Also, parents need to make sure that their own contributions are clearly understood by the service providers.

Therefore, it crucial to make sure that everyone understands and agrees on the information shared and the outcome of the meeting.

Frequently, issues come up in meetings, but do not get resolved. Therefore, a short review of the session also brings to attention all those loose ends that still need to be considered. It is important that either the parent or a service provider do the review; parents are often reluctant, but we encourage them to provide the summary of the meeting. By providing the summary, parents will know if they have a clear understanding of the information shared and the decisions made during the meeting. If there are any misunderstandings, they can be resolved at that time instead delaying to next meeting.

One of the most important and helpful things' parents can do is to learn to communicate effectively. These basic skills will empower parents to better advocate for their children's educational and health programs. Parents can be more active partners as they work with professionals for the future of their children.